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Neil J. MacNeil
Senior Career Development Officer
DS Agents, FP-01 and FP-02
SA-3, Room 3141
(202) 663-0626 (work)
(703) 254-3686 (cell)
(202) 663-0600 (office FAX)

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Rice Says Peace Talks Progressing (Lee, AP)

Tuesday, April 1, 2008

AP

By Matthew Lee

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Monday that Mideast peace talks are "moving in the right direction" although she warned Israel that it should stop new settlement activities that could upset progress.

Rice's comments came after she held talks with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas at the end of a three-day Mideast mission with the goal of achieving an agreement before President Bush leaves office next January. Earlier Monday, Rice met separately with both the Israeli and Palestinian negotiators in Israel and said that she was impressed by the seriousness of their work.

"I think it's all moving in the right direction," Rice said at a news conference with Abbas, saying that things are proceeding toward the goal of reaching some sort of peace agreement by 2009 that would lead

toward the creation of a Palestinian state.

"I fully believe it is a goal we can reach," Rice said.

Asked, however, about Israel continuing to approve construction of new housing in contested territory, Rice criticized the close U.S. ally.

"Settlement activity should stop - expansion should stop," Rice said.

Israel has approved the construction of almost 1,700 homes in contested territory since renewing peace talks with the Palestinians at a U.S.-hosted summit in November, an Israeli watchdog group reported Monday.

Although the survey contained little new information, Peace Now said Israel was undermining negotiations by repeating one of its "worst mistakes" - building on disputed land while holding peace talks.

Jerusalem's city hall announced Monday its plan to construct 600 new apartments in the contested east Jerusalem neighborhood of Pisgat Ze'ev, part of the city Palestinians hope will one day be their capital.

The U.S. has been urging Israel to halt construction in east Jerusalem and the West Bank, areas that Israel captured in the 1967 war but are claimed by the Palestinians for a future state. Israeli construction projects in the disputed areas have sparked a series of crises in the peace negotiations, prompting the Palestinians at one point to suspend negotiations.

"It's my very strong view that the best thing we can do is to focus on getting this (peace) agreement because then we won't have the discussions about what belongs in Israel and what belongs in Palestine," said Rice. "We will know."

In its report Monday, Peace Now said Israel's Defense Ministry has approved plans to build 946 homes in the West Bank since last November's peace summit in Annapolis, Maryland. Peace Now said the government has also given final approval for at least 750 homes in east Jerusalem since talks renewed.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert denied that West Bank building had been stepped up. "All the reports of dramatic construction projects in the (Palestinian) territories are not true, and it's not true that we're building in violation of commitments that were made," Olmert told a meeting of his Kadima Party.

Olmert also said Israel would continue to build in east Jerusalem and in heavily Jewish areas of the West Bank that Israel wants to keep in a final peace agreement.

"This is going on within the framework of negotiations, and the negotiations will continue to progress," he said.

Prior to traveling to Jordan, Rice met with Israeli and Palestinian negotiators. A Palestinian official familiar with the talks said they discussed difficulties in pushing the peace forward and promised to intensify the negotiations between the two sides with increased meetings.

Rice will follow up on the negotiations and will return to the region in early May, said the official on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said Abbas told Rice that settlement construction was "the most

dangerous obstacle to peace." He said otherwise the meetings went "fine."

"All in all it was a good visit and good meetings," said Erekat. "We hope that we can exert every effort to make 2008 a year of peace."

After Rice's meetings here, a senior U.S. official said the U.S. envoy in charge of monitoring implementation, Lt. Gen. William Fraser III, would be returning to the region around April 11.

U.S. talks with the two sides a day earlier produced Israeli promises to ease restrictions in the West Bank.

Rice announced Sunday that Israel will remove about 50 roadblocks and upgrade checkpoints to speed up the movement of Palestinians through the West Bank, while the Palestinians pledged to upgrade security.

The Israelis also will give Palestinians more security responsibility in the town of Jenin and also pledged to increase the number of travel and work permits for Palestinians and to support economic projects in Palestinian towns.

In return, the Palestinians promised to improve policing of Jenin "to provide law and order, and work to prevent terror," according to a State Department statement.

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Prime Minister Salaam Fayyad agreed to what the U.S. termed "concrete steps" at a joint meeting with Rice on Sunday. "We will be monitoring and verifying," Rice said.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Abbas restarted peace talks at a U.S.-hosted summit last November, after seven years of fighting. Despite the pledge to reach a final deal by year's end, negotiators have made no significant progress, although they continue to talk.

Abbas said Monday that his next meeting with Olmert would be on April 7.

Ukraine Treads A Careful Diplomatic Path (Olearchyk, FT)

Tuesday, April 1, 2008

Financial Times

By Roman Olearchyk

When US President George W. Bush stops off in Ukraine today he will hope to leave a better impression than his father, George H.W. Bush, who in 1991 visited Kiev to warn the republics emerging from the collapsing Soviet Union against "suicidal nationalism".

Four months after he delivered what was quickly dubbed the "Chicken Kiev" speech, Ukrainians voted for independence and the Soviet Union rapidly passed into history.

Although Mr Bush Sr later explained that he had been trying to stop Ukrainians from doing "something stupid", his words were widely seen as a futile attempt to prop up Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

Mr Bush Jr arrives in less apocalyptic times but still faces a difficult challenge. He must demonstrate Washington's support for Ukraine on the eve of a Nato summit even though the summit later this week is likely to reject or delay Kiev's bid for a membership action plan - a Nato pre-accession agreement.

While Washington backs Ukraine's Map application - and a similar bid from Georgia - leading European states are opposed for fear of provoking Russia, which is furious about what it sees as the alliance's advance into its neighbourhood.

Before leaving Washington, Mr Bush made clear the US was committed to drawing Ukraine and Georgia into Nato, even though he was unable to make concrete announcements. He said: "I do know that one of the signals we're going to have to send, and must send, is there is a clear path forward for Ukraine and Georgia."

The Ukraine that he visits today is quite different from the country his father saw 17 years ago. Then, Ukraine was on the threshold of its biggest upheaval since the second world war, with independence followed by the disintegration of the planned economy and of communist power. There were sighs of relief when the new country voluntarily gave up its post-Soviet nuclear arsenal. But Ukraine suffered years of political turmoil and economic dislocation before it recovered its stability in the late 1990s under authoritarian President Leonid Kuchma, who tried to steer a course between Russia and the west.

In the 2004 Orange Revolution Ukrainians revolted against Mr Kuchma's oppressive rule and backed the western-oriented Viktor Yushchenko for president. The past three years have seen a ceaseless power struggle between Mr Yushchenko and his rivals, but multi-party democracy has taken root, bolstered by a surge in economic growth and unprecedented foreign investment. Mr Yushchenko has resolutely pursued membership of Nato and the European Union, despite divisions at home and considerable caution among his would-be western partners.

Leonid Kravchuk, chairman of Ukraine's Supreme Soviet in 1991 and later the first democratically elected president, said Ukraine today was a far cry from 17 years ago.

"Bush Sr was aiming to preserve the USSR to maintain stability, his biggest concern being the fate of the nuclear arsenal. Bush Jr has a completely different view of Ukraine than his father." Mr Kravchuk said the visit's aim was to bolster support for Nato in Ukraine, which was now recognised as a viable independent state and partner.

However, in one respect Ukraine is still in the same position as in the early 1990s - it remains subject to the competing pulls of Moscow and the west. While support for future EU accession is high, public backing for Nato is low, at about 30 per cent. Mr Yushchenko has battled to increase support and convince Moscow his country will not become an anti-Russian border post.

Ahead of Mr Bush's visit, Mr Yushchenko told the Financial Times his country would not house foreign military bases as a Nato member and, thus, pose no threat to Russia.

Kiev had proven its dedication to collective security in giving up its nuclear arsenal and in peacekeeping missions, Mr Yushchenko said.

Mr Kravchuk predicted Ukraine would eventually join both Nato and the EU, despite the uncertainty on timing. "The process has been difficult, painful and longer than expected, but we are no doubt set on this course."

Mr Kravchuk, who has opposed swift Nato entry, was concerned about souring relations with Moscow. He said that by joining Nato and the EU, Ukraine would shed its role as a geopolitical chip manipulated by Washington and Moscow. "Then nobody will be able to push Ukraine around."

"In the past, when the US made a major decision on Ukraine, they first looked to see what the reaction of Russia would be. This is still happening, but now world leaders see Ukraine as a future Nato and EU member," Mr Kravchuk added.

Zimbabwe Opposition Insists Mugabe Lost (Times, NYT)

Tuesday, April 1, 2008

The New York Times

By The New York Times

HARARE, Zimbabwe - The nation lingered in political limbo Monday, with its election commission staying silent on the results of Saturday's presidential race, raising additional concerns that President Robert G. Mugabe was intent on rigging the outcome.

As the country waited, a network of civic groups issued its own projection of how the vote would turn out, if legitimately counted. It estimated that the main opposition leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, would receive 47 percent to 51.8 percent, while Mr. Mugabe would get 39.2 percent to 44.4 percent.

That forecast, by the Zimbabwe Election Support Network, was based on a random sampling of results already posted at 435 of the 9,400 polling stations. There was a hush in the room when Noel Kututwa, the network's chairman, began his statement, which had been eagerly anticipated by civic organizations interested in a fair vote. And there was a slight gasp when he read the numbers: if no one wins a majority, a runoff will be required.

"One of the most important changes in this election was the posting of vote counts at individual polling stations," he said, suggesting that because those numbers had been made public any effort to change them would seem outlandishly crude.

Mr. Tsvangirai's party, the Movement for Democratic Change, has already used the posted results to declare victory, though its reading of the numbers is extravagant by comparison. Tendai Biti, the party's secretary general, said Monday that unofficial tallies of more than half the votes showed Mr. Tsvangirai with 60 percent and Mr. Mugabe with 30 percent.

"We are at the moment of liberation from a dictator," Mr. Biti said.

Mr. Mugabe, 84, has led Zimbabwe since 1980. Immensely crafty and thoroughly ruthless, he is not a man likely to give up his hold on power without a fight, analysts, diplomats and Zimbabweans have long contended.

That has left this nation, and a good bit of the world, wondering how he will survive what seems a repudiation by his countrymen, most of whom have become unemployed under Mr. Mugabe's rule. The nation now suffers from an inflation rate of 100,000 percent.

Monday morning at 6:30, nearly 36 hours after the polls closed, Zimbabwe's election commission began broadcasting election results in a way that seemed to mock people's expectations. Totals were given only for races for Parliament - and then just a handful at a time. By day's end, announcements were made for 67 of the 210 seats.

Those results were split nearly evenly between candidates aligned with Mr. Mugabe and with Mr. Tsvangirai, 55, a former labor leader who lost the 2002 presidential vote in a contest that many independent observers considered to have been rigged.

Among Monday's announced losers was Mr. Mugabe's justice minister, Patrick Chinamasa. Among the winners was Piniel Denga, a first-time opposition candidate from Mbare, a township in Harare, the capital. "The people have said enough is enough," he insisted. "Mugabe has wrecked the country. People no longer want to live without food, without toilets, without money. Mugabe can only hang on now by rigging. When will we hear the vote?"

The Bush administration, too, has noticed the delay. "We're urging the election commission to count every vote honestly and to release results quickly that reflect the will and preferences of the people of Zimbabwe," said Tony Fratto, a White House spokesman.

For its part, the election commission has asked for patience, saying it has many votes to record in local and national contests. But for many here, it is hard to believe that the slowness is not deliberate. Zimbabwe seems paused at a crossroads in its history. Though most people have become destitute under Mr. Mugabe, a few have grown fabulously rich. There is a great nervousness among those who have hitched their fortunes to an old autocrat.

Heidi Holland, a writer who has recently published a biography of the president, "Dinner With Mugabe," said in a telephone interview that the delay fitted a familiar and ominous pattern. "There's no way the key older military people will support" the opposition against Mugabe, she said.

But this may be a time of shifting loyalties, of supporters from one side reaching out to the other. Martin Meredith, another Mugabe biographer, said that the president would steal the election if he could, but that it was not certain he had complete control over the apparatus of power, from the military to the intelligence agency.

Mr. Meredith, contacted by telephone, recalled that Mr. Mugabe, once a guerrilla leader, retained some of his most bitter enemies after taking power, including a head of the secret police who had spent considerable effort trying to assassinate him.

Whatever those in government are planning behind closed doors, there is a good amount of furtive discussions among those church and civic groups that intend to protest in the streets if the election is deemed a heist.

Then there is the opposition itself. "We cannot guarantee peace if there is a rigging," said Solomon Madzore, secretary general of the youth wing of the Movement for Democratic Change. "The protest will be spontaneous. There is a lot of anger."

The streets of central Harare appeared normal, but the police had ordered an 8 p.m. curfew in the surrounding townships, telling groups of people to disperse.

Iraq Seems Calmer After Cleric Halts Fighting (Glanz, NYT)

Tuesday, April 1, 2008

The New York Times

By James Glanz

BAGHDAD - Militiamen with the Mahdi Army, the followers of the Shiite cleric Moktada al-Sadr, mostly vanished from the streets of Basra on Monday, a day after he ordered them to lay down their arms and also insisted that the Iraqi government grant a general amnesty for his followers, and made other demands.

Iraqi Army and police forces immediately moved into Basra neighborhoods abandoned by the Mahdi Army, which is the armed wing of Mr. Sadr's political movement, setting up checkpoints and searching for roadside bombs. As helicopters continued buzzing overhead, shops began to reopen and residents ventured out into the streets. The southern Iraqi city had been a battleground since Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki ordered federal forces to begin an assault on the city a week ago.

Mr. Maliki had vowed that he would see the Basra campaign through to a military victory, and the negotiated outcome was seen as a serious blow to his leadership.

The uncertainty over Mr. Sadr's statements were underlined at a news briefing in Baghdad on Monday, where Ali al-Dabbagh, a government spokesman, dodged questions about whether Mr. Maliki would honor Mr. Sadr's demands. When asked if the government would release Mahdi Army detainees who had not been accused of a crime, for instance, Mr. Dabbagh said there had long been plans to let some of them go.

He said the government would "look into" Mr. Sadr's concerns.

Mr. Maliki had said the operation in Basra was meant to root out only criminals, rather than any particular political or military group. But nearly all the fighting involved the Mahdi Army, which gave up little or no ground and essentially fought the federal forces to a standstill.

The streets remained extremely tense on Monday in both Basra and Baghdad.

As a dark Toyota sedan approached an Iraqi Army checkpoint on Monday afternoon just outside Sadr City, the huge Baghdad slum that is Mr. Sadr's power base, a soldier in fatigues and a mask that covered most of his face pointed his weapon and shouted, "Get out of the car!"

The occupants, including a reporter for The New York Times, quickly complied. It turned out that the soldier suspected them of being members of the Mahdi Army, which tends to prefer black Toyotas.

"The Americans will shoot this kind of car, especially if it's full of men," said the soldier, referring to the American military, after checking identification cards and waving the car through.

Rockets and mortar shells again fell on the fortified Green Zone in central Baghdad, as they have for the past week, and the American military said that a soldier died on Monday in northeast Baghdad when his vehicle was struck by a roadside bomb. Another American soldier died from injuries in a bomb attack south of Baghdad on March 23, the military said. But traffic in Baghdad was brisk as the government lifted a curfew put in place during the fighting in Basra.

Within impoverished Sadr City itself, the markets were full. Even as sporadic gunfire could be heard in the distance, people took care of chores that had been suspended during the curfew: a woman in a black abaya, a head-to-toe overgarment, carried cardboard and wood on her head, presumably fuel for a fire; a man hosed off the crumbling sidewalk in front of his shop; two friends chatted at a dingy tire shop.

Levels of violence elsewhere in the country also appeared to be down, at least for a day. Tahseen al-Sheikhly, spokesman for the Baghdad security plan, who had been abducted from the Mahdi-dominated Amin neighborhood on Thursday, was released Monday afternoon, an official at the Interior Ministry said. The widespread clashes that had agitated Iraq's Shiite south were largely absent on Monday.

But officials in several cities assessed the toll of a week of fighting. Leaders in Nasiriya, the site of

intense battles between militias and government forces, said that 165 people had been killed and 300 wounded.

The police chief in the holy city of Karbala said that 12 people had been killed and 500 arrested as a result of the fighting there.

And at a news briefing in Basra, Maj. Gen. Abdul-Karim Khalaf, a spokesman for the Interior Ministry, asserted that in nearly a week of fighting, government security forces had killed 215 members of the Mahdi Army, wounded 600 and arrested 155. He did not give casualty tolls for the government forces.

Another Interior Ministry official said that in the aftermath of the failed assault, the government had dismissed 150 police officers and 400 policemen for refusing to fight in the conflict. And as his government's forces took up abandoned positions in Basra after failing to take them by force, Mr. Maliki gave a speech saying he had obtained evidence that the violence in Basra was a result of the interference of neighboring countries.

"We will try to check this evidence and announce it to the public," Mr. Maliki said.

Last week, Iraq's defense minister, Abdul Kadir al-Obeidi, conceded that the government's military efforts in Basra met with far more resistance than expected. Many Iraqi politicians say that Mr. Maliki's political capital has been severely depleted by the Basra campaign and that he is in the curious position of having to turn to Mr. Sadr, a longtime rival, for a way out.

Senior political leaders involved in the negotiations that led to Mr. Sadr's statements on Sunday indicated that Mr. Maliki had been directly involved, essentially agreeing to Mr. Sadr's demands in advance. But the picture was considerably muddled by Mr. Dabbagh, the government spokesman, who praised Mr. Sadr but gave little indication that his demands were being taken seriously.

Mr. Dabbagh asserted that "the Iraqi government was not part of the negotiations," although he thanked members of Parliament, tribal leaders and others, who, he said, had been. At the same briefing, Maj. Gen. Abdul-Aziz Arrawi, commander of operations for the Ministry of Defense, said over and over again that the Basra operations would continue, with government forces going after criminals with weapons, but that the operations would not specifically be aimed at the Mahdi Army.

General Arrawi said he could not predict the "exact timing" of how long the operations in Basra would go on.

It was also unclear how long the lull in fighting in the streets of Sadr City would last. At its Imam Ali Hospital, the rooms were filled with people grievously wounded in the fighting there over the past week.

One Sadr official, Shiek Amar Asad, 31, said he understood that Mr. Sadr's order to prohibit fighting only with Iraqi security forces. When Americans came into Sadr City, he said, the militia fighters could begin shooting.

"Maybe our case with the government is over," he said. "But not with the occupiers."

Reporting was contributed by Hosham Hussein, Mudhafer al-Husaini, Erica Goode and Qais Mizher in Baghdad and employees of The New York Times in Basra and Nasiriya.

Military Charges Accused Embassy Bomber Despite Civilian

Indictment (Rosenberg, MCT)

Tuesday, April 1, 2008

McClatchy

By Carol Rosenberg

The Pentagon announced Monday that it will seek to try a Tanzanian man for war crimes in the 1998 East African embassy bombings - a decade after he was indicted in New York in the case and four years after he was taken into U.S. custody.

The decision to bring Ahmad Ghailani before a military commission at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, rather than before a civilian federal court was immediately denounced by the Center for Constitutional Rights, whose lawyers represent dozens of the 280 or so detainees at Guantánamo. "The only reason the government is now militarizing these criminal acts is to hide what the CIA is doing in its interrogation program behind the secrecy of the commissions," it said in a statement.

The group noted that other bombing cases have been successfully prosecuted in criminal courts in the United States, Spain and the United Kingdom, and ended with convictions and life sentences.

Ghailani was captured in 2004 in Pakistan and was held by the CIA in secret detention until September 2006, when he was surrendered to U.S. military authorities and transferred to Guantanamo. There has been no known efforts by civilian Justice Department attorneys to have him transferred to New York to stand trial.

But the Pentagon's military commissions legal advisor, Brig. Gen. Thomas Hartmann, who announced the charges on Monday, said in an interview that prosecutions at Guantanamo and in New York are not mutually exclusive. "The president of the United States made a determination that the alleged war crimes that are committed in connection with the global war on terror are going to be tried at the commissions," he said. "If the Southern District of New York wants to proceed with a trial process, they can do that." Spokesmen for Manhattan U.S. Attorney Michael Garcia declined to comment, as did the Department of Justice in Washington. Ghailani, who is in his 30s, is accused of conspiracy, murder and providing material support for terror in the Aug. 7, 1998 suicide attack at the U.S. Embassy in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. If convicted before the military commission, he could receive the death penalty. That day, suicide bombers simultaneously struck at the U.S. Embassy in Kenya, a coordinated precursor of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on New York and the Pentagon. Eleven Africans were killed and about 80 others were wounded in Dar es Salaam, the Tanzanian capital.

The five-foot-four-inch Ghailani, who was born on the Tanzanian island of Zanzibar, addressed the charges during a hearing in Guantanamo, according to a Pentagon transcript released later.

Ghailani rejected claims that he had conducted surveillance on the U.S. Embassy before the attack.

But he said that he did help deliver explosives that turned a Nissan pickup into a deadly truck bomb, though he said he thought the explosives were bound for a diamond mine in Somalia, as well as a "training camp" in Somalia. He did not elaborate.

Unlike other so-called high value detainees who'd been held in CIA custody, Ghailani made no allegation that he'd been tortured or abused while in custody.

No military commission case has been fully prosecuted. Australian foot soldier David Hicks pleaded guilty to providing material support for terrorism a year ago, served a nine-month sentence in Australia

and is now free. The charges against Ghailani still must be approved by a Bush administration appointee, Susan Crawford. If the charges are approved, the Pentagon chief defense would assign him a military defense to help him prepare for trial.

But whether a military commission trial will be held at Guantanamo is uncertain. Lawyers familiar with military legal procedures have said it is unlikely cases can be prepared before the end of the Bush administration, and both Democratic candidates have said they will seek to have accused terrorists held there tried in civilian courts.

Republican John McCain has pledged to close Guantanamo and move any military commissions to the United States.

Opponents Of Musharraf Assume Posts In Pakistan (Gall, NYT)

Tuesday, April 1, 2008

The New York Times

By Carlotta Gall

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan - A stern-faced President Pervez Musharraf swore in a new cabinet on Monday that was filled with political opponents from the main opposition parties, including several who served time in prison under his military government.

Six weeks after national parliamentary elections dealt a crushing blow to Mr. Musharraf's supporters, the president has had to welcome his opponents into the government and watch as they prepare to roll back some of his most controversial measures.

The swearing-in took place here in the capital as the former chief justice, Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry, made his first trip outside the capital since his release from five months of house arrest to a tumultuous welcome.

Mr. Chaudhry traveled to his hometown, Quetta, to speak to the bar association there, and was met by hundreds of lawyers and political party workers, crowds similar to those that followed his travels around the country last year when he was campaigning for reinstatement.

Some of the 24 ministers who took the oath on Monday wore black armbands to show their opposition to Mr. Musharraf, who became the military ruler when he ousted a government led by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in 1999.

Most of the ministers sworn in, including two women, were from the Pakistan Peoples Party, the organization of the slain former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, and the faction of the Pakistan Muslim League led by Mr. Sharif.

Ishaq Dar will serve as finance minister, a post he held in the 1990s before Mr. Musharraf carried out his coup. Chaudhry Ahmed Mukhtar, who defeated a close ally of Mr. Musharraf's in the February parliamentary elections, was selected as defense minister. Both men spent more than a year in jail under Mr. Musharraf. A senior figure in the Pakistan Peoples Party, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, is the new foreign minister.

Chinese Crackdown On Tibet Protested (Constable, WP)

Tuesday, April 1, 2008; A12

The Washington Post
By Pamela Constable

Wrapped in multihued Tibetan national flags, more than 1,500 Tibetan refugees from as far as Georgia and Massachusetts rallied yesterday in front of the White House to protest China's recent crackdown on dissent in their homeland and demand that President Bush boycott opening ceremonies at the Summer Olympics in Beijing.

The demonstrators, who included a group of Buddhist monks and a handful of American supporters, said the combination of widening protests over Tibet and China's upcoming debut as an Olympic host in August have created a unique opportunity to press for greater Tibetan rights and autonomy after a half-century under Chinese control.

"The United States says it has been fighting for human rights and democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan," said Phurbu Dorjee, a Tibetan activist from Brooklyn, N.Y. "Tibetans are suffering. If the U.S. doesn't speak out this time, the issue of Tibet will die, and history will judge America as a hypocrite."

Protest leaders warned against violence, and the rally near the White House was orderly. But a brief disturbance broke out later when the demonstrators marched to the Chinese Embassy. A uniformed Secret Service officer was struck by a thrown object, and windows at the embassy were broken, a Secret Service spokesman said. Two protesters were arrested, he said.

At the gathering in Lafayette Square, Rep. Dennis J. Kucinich (D-Ohio) called for an "Olympics of human rights" and compared the Tibetan struggle to the U.S. civil rights movement, calling it a "moral force that can change the world."

A senior aide to the Dalai Lama, the exiled Tibetan Buddhist leader and Nobel Peace laureate, cautioned the crowd in the square against allowing the crusade to spill into violence or split into factions.

"We must never allow our movement to become violent," said the aide, Lodi Gyaltzen Gyari. He stressed that sympathy toward Tibetans, gaining worldwide momentum after three weeks of protests in Tibet and neighboring Chinese provinces, could decline if frustrated young Tibetans rebel against the Dalai Lama's philosophy of peaceful resistance and dialogue with Beijing. "Please do not depart from that path," he said.

In an interview later, Gyari said he wanted give the Bush administration's policy of quiet diplomacy a chance. "But I am skeptical, because I know that silent diplomacy does not work with the Chinese," he said.

During the protest at the White House, the Tibetans were fervent but orderly, shouting, "China is a killer, shame on killers. . . . China is a monster, shame on monsters." They also chanted slogans against the Olympics, especially against plans to carry the Olympic torch across Tibet.

The demonstrators sang a Tibetan resistance anthem from 1959, the year of a failed uprising against Chinese control. They stamped their feet when it urged defiance.

The crowd included many women and children, some in traditional Tibetan dress. Many said they had come by bus from East Coast cities.

"I am here because Tibet is my country and they are killing our brothers and sisters," said Tsering Chodon, 34, a hair stylist from Charlottesville .

After the rally, protesters followed monks up Connecticut Avenue toward the Chinese Embassy.

Visa Application Period Opens For Highly Skilled Workers (Preston, NYT)

Tuesday, April 1, 2008

The New York Times

By Julia Preston

The annual sweepstakes for visas for highly skilled temporary foreign workers begins on Tuesday, the opening day for applications to the vastly oversubscribed immigration program that is the center of a growing controversy in Congress.

The federal authorities will accept petitions from employers for 65,000 temporary work visas, known as H-1Bs, that are available for the year that starts Oct. 1. Last year, the agency received enough petitions to cover the annual quota on the first day applications were accepted. About half of the total petitions filed were rejected because the supply of visas had run out.

Technology companies have urged Congress to raise the annual limit, saying they face damaging shortages of the computer engineers and software technicians that these visas attract.

But a number of lawmakers, led by Senator Richard J. Durbin, Democrat of Illinois, and Senator Charles E. Grassley, Republican of Iowa, say foreign companies have used the program to import workers who compete against Americans and lower wage rates. The senators oppose increasing the number of H-1B visas without closing loopholes in the program.

Citizenship and Immigration Services has said that it will accept H-1B visa petitions over five business days, ending April 7. Last year the agency closed the application period after one day

because the quota had already been surpassed. In mid-April, the agency will run a computerized lottery to choose about 65,000 petitions.

"We want to make sure everyone has the opportunity to get their petition in to make the process as fair as possible," said Christopher S. Bentley, a spokesman for the immigration agency.

For the first time, the agency this year has explicitly prohibited companies from filing more than one petition for the same worker.

Technology companies have become increasingly frustrated and vocal about the H-1B visa limits and the lottery selection method. In March, Bill Gates of Microsoft told the House Committee on Science and Technology that the current system "makes attracting and retaining high-skilled immigrants exceptionally challenging for U.S. firms."

Mr. Gates said Microsoft and other American companies had been forced to export jobs that could have been done in the United States to countries more welcoming to skilled foreign workers.

A study in March by the National Foundation for American Policy, an immigration research group in Washington, concluded that H-1B workers helped United States technology companies generate jobs for American workers. The companies increased their employment by five workers for every H-1B visa they sought, the study found.

The H-1B visas bring foreign workers, preferably with master's degrees or doctorates, for an initial period of three years, renewable for another three years. The visas are intended to help

American companies fill shortages of employees with sophisticated skills.

But official figures released by Mr. Grassley show that the three biggest users of the H-1B program in 2007 were three companies based in India that perform computer and software contract work here using foreign workers, mainly Indian.

The three companies - Infosys Technologies and Wipro Limited of Bangalore, and Satyam Computer Services of Hyderabad - accounted for more than 8,500 of the H-1B visas that received preliminary approval in 2007, figures show.

Mr. Durbin, the Senate's second-ranking Democrat, said in an interview on Monday that these companies had distorted the program's purpose.

"They are H-1B brokers," Mr. Durbin said. "For a fee, they are moving these engineers to the United States for three or six years, training them and then moving them back to India to work for companies that compete with America."

Ron Hira, a professor of public policy at the Rochester Institute of Technology, said that gaps in the rules had allowed technology companies, including American ones, to misuse the program.

"Basically, H-1B has been thoroughly corrupted," Mr. Hira said. "Under H-1B you could be forced to train your own replacement," he said, speaking of American workers.

Mr. Hira pointed out that current rules do not require employers to prove a labor shortage by advertising jobs or recruiting in the United States. He said wages established for H-1B technology workers were below market levels in this country, allowing

companies that use the visas to gain a competitive advantage and lowering wages over all.

Mr. Durbin and Mr. Grassley have proposed requiring companies to advertise jobs with the Labor Department before applying for visas, and giving the department new monitoring authority.

Infosys, in a statement, said that about 30 percent of its work for American employers was performed "at the client's location" in this country. It said it used H-1B visas to bring in "our trained resources" for several years or less.

Wipro said that 20 percent of its workers in the United States were "local employees." It said it used H-1B visas to bring in workers "for a short duration."

Veterans Return To Bleak Job Market

By Stephen Barr
Tuesday, April 1, 2008; D01

Finding a job is turning out to be a very tough challenge for returning veterans; harder than for civilians of similar age and education.

Eighteen percent of the veterans recently back from tours of duty are unemployed. Of those employed since leaving the military, 25 percent earn less than \$21,840 a year, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The data come from a survey of 1,941 veterans who left the military between December 2004 and January 2006. The survey is in line with Census Bureau and other data that indicate employment rates and wages are lower for troops returning from the Iraq and Afghanistan war zones than their civilian peers.

"Transitioning back into employment, education, and/or training after completing military service can be challenging for some military personnel," the study says, adding that "it is vital" for the VA to better understand the programs and services it provides.

The survey was conducted for the VA by a consultant, who sent an analysis to the department last year. The survey findings have not been released by the VA but have been obtained by groups that advocate on behalf of veterans. They were reported by the Wall Street Journal last week.

VA spokesman Matt Smith said the VA, Defense Department and Labor Department "are working

together to review the data provided in the report, interpret the data, consider what implications the data may have on programs administered by our departments, and determine what further research, if any, may be necessary."

He said the VA intends to release the report after the internal review is finished.

According to the survey, 48.4 percent of the respondents said they took advantage of the GI Bill, which provides up to \$1,000 a month for 36 months for veterans who enroll in colleges or other education programs.

But the survey findings also raised questions about whether the GI Bill paid off in terms of higher income or a better job.

"Unfortunately, we found that receiving the GI Bill was not a strong predictor of successful employment outcomes such as high earnings, responsibility in civilian work and placement in senior management," the study says.

Even those using the GI Bill may not be competitive in the labor market. Private-sector personnel officials, for example, reported that many veterans "were not prepared to market themselves to the business environment -- they did not seem to understand the culture and expectations; thus were not career ready," the study says.

In general, returning military personnel often have trouble finding jobs that match their military occupations.

"Protective services," such as security and police work, and facilities and maintenance repair were the most popular occupations held by former enlisted personnel, the report says.

The survey respondents said they used the Internet, personal and professional contacts, newspaper ads and federal job listings to seek employment.

Compared to their peers, veterans are more likely to work for the government and less likely to work for a private-sector business or to be self-employed, according to Census data used in the study.

But many employers are not aware of the skills, especially in technology, held by former military personnel, the study says.

It recommended that the government look at new ways, including marketing campaigns, to help veterans find jobs in the private sector. "Education and training programs, such as the GI Bill, may need to be redesigned to maximize the transfer value of military experiences and enable internships and contract work that connects service members to career opportunities," the study says.

The VA has stepped up its efforts, offering employment services such as Coming Home to Work. The program provides job opportunities and work experience for personnel leaving the armed forces because of medical reasons.

But *Vanessa Williamson*, policy director for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, said she was concerned by the survey's finding of an 18 percent unemployment rate for military personnel discharged in the last three years.

"Any American would agree that we need to support our troops and our veterans, but what level of support are we talking about when people coming back from war have low-income jobs and are struggling to make ends meet," Williamson said. "That doesn't sound like support to me."

Stephen Barr's e-mail address is barrs@washpost.com.

Iraq: \$5 Billion More For Budget (AP)

Tuesday, April 1, 2008

AP

Increased oil revenue will allow Iraq to add \$5 billion to its 2008 budget, money earmarked for investment in infrastructure and services, a government spokesman said Monday.

Like all oil-producing nations, Iraq has seen windfalls as oil prices have climbed above \$100 a barrel. The country's oil exports have increased lately since declining after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003.

Iraq's average production for February was 2.4 million barrels per day, with exports averaging 1.93 million barrels daily. An average of 1.54 million barrels were sent each day in February through the main oil hub of Basra, according to the Oil Ministry. A week of fighting between government troops and militants in Basra has hardly affected the oil industry, officials said.

The additional \$5 billion brings the budget to about \$53.4 billion.

The new funds will be included in a complementary budget to be issued by the end of June, government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh said in a statement. These funds will be added to \$15 billion that were already planned for economic and infrastructure development, he said.

Report identifies top 10 management challenges facing next administration

By Elizabeth Newell enewell@govexec.com March 31, 2008

The federal government will face a wide range of challenges over the next decade, with retirement and health care reform topping the list, according to a report released on Monday by the IBM Center for the Business of Government.

The center identified 10 significant management policy issues expected to confront federal decision-makers and public sector program managers in anticipation of the administration transition and to acknowledge the center's 10th anniversary.

"I think we've started to think in a way the next administration will have to in terms of figuring out what they will need to wrestle with in terms of mission and management issues," said Jonathan Breul, executive director for the Center for the Business of Government. "There's arguably not much chance of a two-term

president if he or she doesn't help lead to some solution on those issues."

The management challenges run the gamut from green leadership to balancing security and privacy. Topping the list is what Breul calls fiscal sanity, or the reform of retirement and health care programs such as Social Security and Medicare, which are putting a strain on the government's financial well-being. While the center did not rank challenges in order of importance, Breul said it made a conscious decision to put fiscal sanity first.

The center's report states that "all routes to salvation at the federal, state and local levels require reforming federal retirement and health care programs before they squeeze out other critical national priorities."

No list of looming government challenges is complete without mention of the retirement crisis. The center, however, did not focus just on the need to replace the throngs of baby boomers set to retire, but how that exodus could affect government operations.

"It's a question of competence," Breul said. "There are a whole set of issues that require substantial experience and training with much more technical and service-oriented capabilities on behalf of public service." He mentioned air traffic control as a field requiring a great deal of technical knowledge, and an area where the government is grappling with a skill drain.

Workforce challenges go hand in hand with procurement challenges, another shoe-in on the center's list. The contracting-related management challenges are broad and extensive, but Breul said the next administration must look at contracting strategically and understand "government needs a strong cadre of contractors supported by a strong cadre of good government employees." He urged presidential candidates to avoid making it just a "numbers exercise."

Breul said primary threats, such as food contamination and pandemic, which agencies must address in the near future are "nasty cross-boundary difficulties," requiring extensive collaboration among federal agencies, along with state and local governments.

The report also identified information overload as another challenge for the government. While new technologies and systems are providing the government with necessary data, such as surveillance footage, weather and climate information and census statistics, managers must still adapt to process all the data efficiently.

The government also must expect surprises and manage in a way that allows for early warnings, an understanding of emerging threats and effective government responses.

"The country can't afford any more fumbled responses to catastrophic or nonroutine management challenges, whether caused by natural or human means," Breul said.

The 10 challenges outlined by the center in its report are:

- Fiscal sanity
- Crisis of competence
- Information overload
- Governing without boundaries
- E-government

- Role of contractors
- Results-oriented government
- Green leadership
- Security and privacy in a flat world
- Anticipation of emerging threats and disasters

GAO questions costs of OPM's retirement systems modernization

By STEPHEN LOSEY

March 31, 2008

Congressional auditors are questioning whether the Office of Personnel Management is accurately portraying the costs and performance of the agency's new automated retirement system.

OPM last year raised its cost estimate of the Retirement Systems Modernization program, or RetireEZ, by \$50 million and now says it will cost \$421 million. But the Government Accountability Office said there is no way to verify that figure. GAO has asked OPM for more information on RetireEZ's technical specifications and cost-estimating methods, and wants those estimates to be independently checked.

GAO wants to see test results of how accurately the system calculates benefits, how quickly cases can be processed, and whether the system is ready to be rolled out. GAO is also worried that OPM unveiled RetireEZ without resolving some system defects.

RetireEZ is a computerized record-keeping and retirement calculation system meant to replace the current paper-based system. It will digitize all employees' payroll records and other files used to calculate retirement annuities and allow OPM to pay new retirees their full annuities right away.

Advertisement

RetireEZ became operational for the first 26,000 employees on Feb. 25 and will be available to all employees by February 2009.